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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 STATE 020919

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/04/2029
TAGS: [PREL](#) [EU](#) [SY](#)
SUBJECT: U.S. ENGAGEMENT WITH SYRIA

Classified By: NEA Acting A/S David Hale, Reasons 1.4 (b & d)

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) Department is providing action addressees the talking points below to use on an as needed basis with host governments in order to explain our intentions and reasoning for engaging the Syrian government (SARG). As reported in the media, NEA Acting Assistant Secretary Jeffrey Feltman and NSC Senior Director for Middle East and North Africa Daniel Shapiro arrive in Damascus Saturday, March 7. This visit marks the first time since former Deputy Secretary Armitage traveled to Damascus in January 2005 that we have sent senior officials to Syria for a comprehensive discussion beyond Iraqi refugees. U.S. officials discussed our engagement efforts with several European and regional partners on the margins of the Gaza donors' conference in Sharm el-Sheikh. We anticipate, however, host countries' continued interest in our policy toward Syria. Our message to European and Arab partners must emphasize that: our policy review is ongoing; our engagement efforts are results-oriented and will be modified depending on SARG actions; and a coordinated approach to Syria is critical. End Summary.

TALKING POINTS

¶2. (SBU) Missions may draw from the following points as needed:

-- As we continue to re-examine our policy toward Syria we think it is important to engage our partners to determine how best to advance our common goals.

--We continue to have serious concerns about Syria's actions and the threat it poses to the region, and are looking for the most effective way to address Syria's destabilizing behavior. As the Secretary said, we are not engaging for engagement's sake but rather to protect the interests of both the U.S. and our allies.

--Dialogue is a tool to address our concerns including, Syria's continued support to Hamas and other Palestinian terrorist groups; its support of AQI affiliated foreign fighter networks; its relationship with Iran; its interference in Lebanon and facilitation of Hizballah's rearmament; its efforts to acquire nuclear and non-conventional weaponry; and its worsening human rights situation.

--Acting Assistant Secretary Feltman met with Imad Mustapha, Syrian Ambassador to the United States, on February 26. The meeting was a frank discussion on U.S.-Syrian relations with each side raising issues of concern.

--There has been no decision on returning an ambassador to Damascus. Visits to Damascus by Acting Assistant Secretary

Feltman and NSC Senior Director for Middle East and North Africa Shapiro are opportunities to discuss the future of U.S.-Syria relations, and reiterate the key issues that must be addressed if engagement is to continue. Senator Mitchell will not travel to Damascus on this trip. There has been no decision on when he may visit Syria.

--Our efforts are aimed at promoting regional security and stability by: advancing a comprehensive peace that includes a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict; urging Palestinian reconciliation on appropriate terms; supporting a sovereign and stable Lebanon; combating terrorism; and countering negative Iranian influence.

--A comprehensive peace must include agreements between Israel and all its Arab neighbors, and we commend Turkish efforts to mediate indirect talks. We continue to support Israeli-Syrian talks and urge both sides to resume discussions as soon as possible.

--Progress on the Syrian track must not undermine progress on the Israeli-Palestinian track, nor must it come at the expense of other priorities in the region, including Lebanese sovereignty. Moreover, Syria must be prepared to address Israeli security concerns.

-- The U.S. will not make a deal with Syria over the Special

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Tribunal for Lebanon, which we continue to support, or over Lebanese sovereignty.

--We must remain united in our approach to Syria, and as we cautiously engage Syria, we will want your support and input. Regional peace and security is our shared goal. We must focus our efforts on urging Syria to recognize its responsibilities and take actions that promote stability.

--We urge you to press Syria to: use its influence with Hamas and other Palestinian militants to curtail destructive behavior; to disrupt foreign fighter networks operating in Syria and improve counterterrorism cooperation; to ensure that Lebanon's upcoming elections are free from violence and intimidation; to fulfill its obligations to exchange ambassadors and delineate its border with Lebanon; and to cooperate with the IAEA investigation into its clandestine nuclear program.

--We must show, through words and actions, that our objective vis--vis Syria is the same: Syria must play a stabilizing role in the region. Syria will look for differences in our messages and our objectives.

-- --(For USEU and Embassies in EU member states only): We continue to believe that Syria must demonstrate a commitment to peace and stability, via concrete actions and not merely empty promises, before any steps are taken to advance the EU-Syria Association Agreement.

REPORTING DEADLINE

13. (SBU) Please report any substantive responses by cable.

BACKGROUND

14. (C) Although our policy toward Syria remains under review, recent engagement, including AA/S Feltman's meeting with Syrian Ambassador Imad Mustapha and travel to Damascus by Feltman and NSC Senior Director for Middle East and North Africa Dan Shapiro, demonstrates that we are using dialogue to advance U.S. interests. But as the Secretary has said, we are not engaging for engagement's sake. Instead, our efforts are focused on progress and we will evaluate continuously the

effectiveness of our engagement and modify our efforts accordingly.

¶5. (C) Our allies will be keen to know the status of our policy review on Syria and the effects of our direct engagement. Our underlying message must be twofold: 1) our efforts are results-oriented, with direct engagement an opportunity to address key issues of concerns; and 2) the international community must adopt a coordinated approach vis--vis Syria. Our Arab partners should know that we will continue to address their concerns, namely countering Iranian regional influence and advancing comprehensive peace, in future engagements. With our European and Turkish allies, we need to underscore the importance of coordinating our approach so that we can accurately evaluate Syria's responsiveness (or lack thereof) and ensure Syria is not prematurely rewarded while continuing its destabilizing actions.

POINT OF CONTACT

¶6. (SBU) Please contact Syria Desk Officer Allison Monz (NEA/ELA) at (202) 647-1131 or via e-mail at monzam@state.sgov.gov for further background information or argumentation to meet our objectives.
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